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WHEN AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY BECOMES AN ILLNESS

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Beloved Perfector:

The record of the ages is filled with accounts of people who searched for, and found, a scapegoat to blame for their personal failures. This habit, according to biblical teaching, goes back to the dawn of human history. In the story of man's beginnings, Adam placed the blame for his disobedience on Eve, while Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent. Always man has tried to escape responsibility for his shortcomings by shifting the reason for his failure to someone else.

The word, "scapegoat", has its origin in certain ancient rituals. A goat was chosen to bear the sins of the people. By the "laying on of hands", the sins were placed upon the goat, which was then burned as a sacrifice. The modern use of the word, "scapegoat", is much more general. It signifies the evasion of our mistakes and failures by blaming innocent people or circumstances. This common tendency is dishonest but, more than that, it is dangerous to the personality.

In this Lesson, we will examine some of the common uses that we make of the "scapegoat" principle in our society, but most particularly in our personal lives. Don't be afraid to face the facts, however painful they may seem to be. Remember that you are not alone in a desire to escape unpleasantness. You will discover that this handicap to a full life has an almost universal application. Few of us consistently avoid the temptation to rationalize our weaknesses by blaming someone or something for our own shortcomings.

You will never realize your fullest potential until you are willing to deal with this age-long and universal characteristic of an immature personality. New life and strength to overcome your weaknesses is available as you come to understand yourself better. Take the necessary steps to conquer this weakness whenever it besets you, and to help others whose lives are crippled by it.

Earnestly and thoughtfully say the words of the following prayer and then proceed with the lesson:

PRAYER

Dear Father God, we thank Thee for life, and for health, and for strength. Thou hast made us to be triumphant in our daily lives. Thou hast made available power sufficient for every need. Forgive us for our lack of faith. Forgive us when we try to escape our responsibilities by blaming others. Enable us to appropriate Thy gifts so that we may be victorious in our personal lives, and be spared the need to find in others an excuse for our failures. Give us the grace by which we may become our best selves. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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THE SCAPEGOAT PRINCIPLE The idea of a scapegoat is common in social, economic, and international relationships. Business blames organized labor, and unions blame business for the ills of our time. Private enterprise blames government for inflation and high taxes, while government blames private enterprise for the poor housing, lack of hospital care, and other social ills which make high expenditures necessary.

In world affairs, we find the same to be true. As long as men are greedy for power and pursue selfish and often ruthless paths, there will be times they feel they must justify themselves by finding a scapegoat on which to blame their actions. We have only to pick up our newspapers and magazines to read examples of this in varying degrees.

The use of a convenient scapegoat is no less a problem in our personal lives. People still try to explain human sin as the work of evil and impersonal forces in their nature. An eight-year-old boy stole money from his mother's pocketbook to go to the motion pictures. When caught in the act of stealing, the boy said, "It was the Devil. He told me to take the money." The boy was in the long train of excuse-makers that begins with Adam.

Some religious sects encourage their adherents to escape the pain that comes from a guilty conscience by shifting the blame for evil to their bodies, or to the "old Adam" in them. A follower of such a cult was indicted for a serious offense. He made the plea before the judge that he had not really committed the crime, it was his evil body. The judge replied, "I am not able to distinguish between yourself and your body, so I must ask you to accompany your body to prison for six months."

The scapegoat principle operates both on the conscious and subconscious levels. You have known of carpenters who cursed the hammer when they missed the nail and struck their finger. Many golfers blame the golf course when they miss a putt. A football player will often wipe his hands on his jersey when he misses a pass to let the spectators know that it was the wet ball, not his failure, that caused the mistake. A housewife will blame the oven for an overcooked pie or roast. A business man will often attribute unfair competition, or inferior personnel in his organization, for a poor record. All of these are in the long

procession of men and women who endeavor to avoid personal responsibility by using a scapegoat.

Differences in temperament account for the varying uses of the scapegoat idea. The introvert personality usually will blame himself for everything that goes wrong. He is often unfair, attributing to his weakness, or to the fact that he is "jinxed", failures that are entirely beyond his control. It is the extreme introvert who is apt to develop mental illness of the type that leads him to bemoan his shortcomings, and to attribute his illness to his sins. Frequently, the victim of anxiety-neurosis centers on the conviction that he has committed "the unpardonable sin". He utilizes this idea to avoid facing up to the reality of life. It is his scapegoat.

Possibly some of you have an introverted personality. If so, you will be tempted to blame yourself for the misfortunes that seem to plague your efforts. Instead of doing this, try to understand your motives. Ask yourself whether you have made your supposed limitations into a scapegoat. If you understand how your mind works, you will be aided in overcoming this weakness.

The extrovert, on the other hand, always blames others, never himself. No person with this type of personality ever finds it easy to acknowledge a fault, to take blame for a mistake, or to apologize for errors for which he is clearly responsible.

I listened to a young man telling of a fatal accident in which he was driving the car. It was months after the accident. He told of the night with a sad smile on his face, as if this would gain sympathy from those who listened to his story. He dwelt at length on the weather, certain that the accident would never have occurred if he had not been hurrying to get his young lady home before the heavy storm broke. He told of the blinding glare of the lights of an approaching car, though testimony revealed that they were dimmed at the time. He spoke of the state of the highway, rounded in the middle. He did not mention the fact that he was traveling at eighty miles an hour on a highway where the speed limit was set at fifty. His story was sufficient to convince the court. His scapegoats proved real enough to get him acquitted.

The fact that scapegoats often enable us to evade responsibility is their most dangerous characteristic. They discourage honesty and integrity. They create the false assurance that we can avoid obligation. They are a constant threat to health and happiness.

Often, we adopt a major scapegoat, which we carry throughout life. Lack of good health is sometimes a means of escape that enables us to justify our failure to assume our full obligations within the home or community. The claim that we are physically unable to do certain things may be just a scapegoat that excuses us from helping in any way.

For some people, a political party is the scapegoat they blame for everything in society that goes wrong. They carry the idea to their graves, never making even a small effort to improve the housing, or the cultural facilities, or the schools of the community in which they live.

I recently examined the case of a woman who for many years succeeded in

dodging her responsibilities by frequently changing her scapegoats. No sooner was one dispelled than she created another. The woman was mentally ill, but her experience points to the pitfalls that all of us must avoid. For a time she blamed her doctor for her difficulties. He had, she alleged, made improper advances to her. When it was suggested that the doctor be confronted with the charges, she drew away, saying that she had been pledged to silence. When the pressure became severe, she dropped the doctor as her scapegoat and concentrated on her minister. She complained that, although he visited other parishioners in her neighborhood, he never called upon her. When it was suggested that the matter be taken up with the minister, she violently objected, saying that he himself was ill and that it would upset him. After this scapegoat was disposed of, she began a series of accusations against her mother. "Sometimes," she said, "my mother drags me across the floor by the hair on my head." This story, like the others, was pure fabrication. Her mother was a charming person, bewildered and troubled because she could not do more for the daughter she loves. The woman's stories were designed to serve a two-fold purpose - to create sympathy, and to offer an excuse for her evasion of normal duties.

This is a factor in life that frequently has to be faced. Our scapegoats are created to gain sympathy from those about us, and to enable us to avoid both our obligations and the responsibility for our mistakes.

If you are a normal person you can deal with this problem without the assistance of a counselor. First, you need a willingness to fearlessly face your real self. Take a close look at your attitudes. If you are using the scapegoat principle to avoid facing reality, admit it. If you can't be honest with others, at least be honest with yourself. Begin to look at the situation as it really is. Then make a start in using such power and ability as you may possess. You will discover that the change will bring you a contentment that you may never before have known.

Now let us proceed to an examination of the more common types of scapegoat, and discover certain ways by which we can combat their influence.

POOR HEALTH AS A SCAPEGOAT The most frequently used means to avoid reality is sickness, both genuine and imaginary.

I became convinced that a woman I knew was using sickness as a scapegoat to escape her obligations. When I suggested this to her, she cried, "Don't say that. Every time my doctor or someone says that to me I feel like screaming." I prayed that she might receive the healing power of God to make her whole. Later, she confessed that while I was praying, she was saying to herself, "I don't want to get well! I don't want to get well!" It was only after several months that she was honest enough to recognize that she was using her illness as a precious possession that enabled her to avoid facing up to responsibility, and gave her a reason for feeling sorry for herself.

Some months ago, there appeared in the public press a fantastic story of a man who had spent his life in finding scapegoats. This is the account as it appeared: "While Roderick was still in school, he got the idea that he was suffering from a peculiar sort of disease, and he studied the symptoms in the encyclopedia with such good effect that he was able to escape all sorts of undesirable assignments and examinations. He made the mistake of describing to his doctor the symptoms of a disease so rare that a number of physicians converged on him to observe and analyze the patient. They pressed so hard for details that he was forced to admit that it all was imaginary. After that he was more careful. He gained the reputation of being a walking mass of disease. They operated on him several times, and gave him almost every treatment known to modern medicine. He went on for several years, attracting attention, and enlisting sympathy until one day, weakened by powerful drugs, he was struck down in the street by a truck and killed. Doctors who performed the autopsy declared that it was a pity his life had been cut off so prematurely for he was physically a perfect specimen of humanity."

Whatever the state of your health, it is a threat to your personality development whenever you are tempted to use any illness to get what you want. If it is the satisfaction of achievement which you crave, then use what abilities you have in a creative manner. If it is attention you desire, then become the person who inspires admiration and affection. Using illness as a scapegoat will only serve to stifle the possibilities that are within you.

ENVIRONMENT AS A SCAPEGOAT Many of us find in our environment some factor which we conveniently use as a scapegoat. The alcoholic often blames his wife, or the tension between wife and mother-in-law, or some tragedy in the family history. Many persons who drift away from the church use the hypocrisy of some members to hide their unwillingness to meet the ethical obligations of faith.

A man told me very seriously that the business he was engaged in made it impossible for anyone to be honest. I advised him at the time to get out of the business if he felt he could not be true to the principles by which he knew he must live. But many other men hold fast to integrity and honor, yet prosper in that type of business. My friend was using a convenient scapegoat to justify his moral weakness.

A husband and wife talked to me about their tensions, centered largely in finances. When I suggested a radical readjustment of their spending pattern as essential to the preservation of their marriage, the wife violently objected. She informed me that I did not understand the suburb where they lived. "You have to keep certain standards, which require new clothes, new cars, and all that, if you are going to be anyone in our social set," she said. She blamed the community and the neighbors for the excesses in her spending. The scapegoat allowed her to feel self-satisfied, even at the expense of her marriage.

Any of us can find a scapegoat in our environment to justify our failures if we want to use that method of escape. Often it offers such a convenient way

to avoid tension that it is tempting to do it. You can blame the church, the school, the neighbors, your business associates, your "luck" or fortune for the obvious shortcomings in your life. You can do it, but only at the peril of lasting unhappiness and pressing guilt. More often than not you subconsciously recognize your weakness, and you despise yourself for it.

Get rid of the insidious enemy within your personality. Your future happiness may depend on whether you come to terms with the scapegoat which you have adopted, and banish it from your life.

HEREDITY AS A SCAPEGOAT It is only in recent years that the rank and file of men and women have realized how important heredity is as a factor in influencing life and conduct. The contention that degeneracy and nobility tends to run in families has been demonstrated in a number of careful studies.

Many centuries ago the Roman Plutarch wrote: "It is indeed a desirable thing to be well-descended, but the glory belongs to our ancestors." He was saying what numerous students of eugenics have said in this generation; namely, that many of our achievements can be traced to our origins. A well-known psychiatrist seeks to demonstrate this principle by telling of two wolf cubs he found, and endeavored to train. For a time, they appeared to have lost all ferocity, and to have acquired a docility contrary to their real nature. However, quite suddenly one of them escaped and took up the life of his ancestors in the woods. Sometime later, the other broke loose in the barn, and viciously attacked other animals. It had to be destroyed. The father of this man said to him, "Some things we have to learn in life. A wolf is born to be a wolf, and he is always going to be a wolf."

There is enough truth in this approach to create dangerous attitudes. It is tempting to use our heredity as an excuse to justify certain traits of character, or lack of personal ambition. The excuses that can be traced to heredity then become a scapegoat of devastating influence.

I know a brilliant man whose father, mother, and two brothers died in their forties of heart failure. He is convinced that he is destined by heredity to live only a few years. But he refuses to make this an excuse for indolence or to become an object of pity. Instead, he lives life to the full, pouring out his strength to help others.

This suggests certain ideas that you need to consider with regard to your heredity. It is true that a person who lags behind others both in intelligence and in character may not be wholly to blame. He may have to contend with difficult factors in his ancestry. These make his upward fight difficult as compared with those who have inherited a natural kind of goodness. Yet many of the saints had nothing in their blood that should have made them different from other men. A countless host of the martyrs who suffered and died for their principles had nothing in their background that would seem to explain their courage.

Is it not clear that faith adds something to life that cancels out the influences of an unfortunate family background? Inspired by faith, the sons and daughters of drunkards and wastrels have achieved amazing victories in their personal lives.

You may be tempted to use your ancestry as a scapegoat to explain your lack of health, of intellectual brilliance, or of moral strength. Resist this choice. Faith in God will unlock a power by which you can live triumphantly. The question you face is whether you really want that kind of personal victory. If so, step out from behind the scapegoat where you have sought shelter. Begin to live by the highest standards you know, and with the power that God will give you. You will then begin to create a different kind of ancestry for those who follow you. If your heritage is good, the one you bestow will be even better if you live with honesty, nobility, and courage.

THE BEHAVIORISTIC PSYCHOLOGY A certain type of psychology has provided many individuals in this generation with a shallow kind of scapegoat. Behaviorism explains personality in terms of reflex-action. It describes the individual as the sum total of his sensations. Sin is seen in terms of sickness. "Man cannot help what he does, because his conduct is determined by influences over which he has no control, and for which he has no responsibility," it is said.

Behaviorism provides a comfortable and easy refuge for those who want to escape feelings of guilt. It also undermines every value that has been left to us by the ages. It disposes of the need to consult and be guided by the conscience. We can readily understand why many people should accept such psychological ideas as a pleasant scapegoat.

The psychologist may rightly state that his system of thought neither proves, nor denies, the reality of God. Yet many leading psychoanalysts such as Dr. Karl Yung have declared that life in the universe cannot be explained apart from faith in a creating deity.

You are on sinking sands if you endeavor to justify your concept of life and personality solely on psychological grounds. Never forget that there is both philosophy and theology to be considered. The only satisfying concept of the universe, and of your place in the plan of life, must be based upon faith in a living God, and in those standards of conduct that have been forged out of that faith.

Whatever type of scapegoat you are tempted to use, recognize it for what it is - an endeavor to escape facing your obligations. Learn to recognize these temptations to grasp excuses as a substitute for action. The fullest satisfactions that the years ahead may bring to you depend upon your willingness to

accept yourself as you are, and to receive divine power by which you may go forward to new and greater achievements.

AFFIRMATION

I recognize the temptation to seek escape from obligations by the use of scapegoats.

I will face my weaknesses with prayerful concern.

I will accept divine aid by which I may be myself- my BEST SELF.

Blessings,

Your Instructor.